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**Summary of Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission  
Hearing on Immigrant Integration**

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**The Demography of California's Immigrants**

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**Demographic context**

The population of California is among the most diverse and complex populations anywhere in the world. No other developed region of the world that is the size of California has sustained such rapid and tremendous population growth over the past several decades. As recently as 1950, California was home to only 10 million people, or about one out of every fifteen United States residents. By 200, California's population had more than tripled to almost 34 million people. Today, one out of every eight United States residents is a Californian. The California Department of Finance projects that by the year 2030 over 50 million people will reside in California.

California's population growth is unique and noteworthy, but equally remarkable is the nature and composition of that growth. As recently as 1970, almost 80 percent of the state's residents were non-Hispanic White. By 1998 only 52 percent of the state's residents were non-Hispanic White; Hispanics comprised 30 percent of the state's population, Asians comprised 11 percent, and African Americans comprised 7 percent. Thus, in 1998, the minority population reached a point of near parity with the majority population. Indeed, the California Department of Finance projects that shortly after the turn of the century, no race/ethnic group will constitute a majority of the state's population. The 2000 census might find that this has already occurred. If current patterns of immigration and fertility rates persist, by the year 2025 Hispanics will represent the single largest ethnic group in the state.

Over the past few decades, much if not most of California's population growth and increasing diversity can be attributed to large increases in immigration. In order to understand California's population, it is essential to understand the large immigrant population of the state.

**Demographic Characteristics of California's Immigrants**

California's immigrant population is large, diverse, and growing rapidly. The immigrant population of California has grown from just over 1 million in 1950 to over 8 million by 1997. California not only has the greatest number of immigrants of any state, it has more than twice as many as the next leading state (New York, with 3.6 million immigrants in 1997). The share of California's population that is comprised of

immigrants reached 25 percent by 1997, compared to only 8.5 percent in 1960. In the entire United States, immigrants comprised only 9.7 percent of the population in 1997.

California's immigrants are diverse, coming to the state from dozens of countries. In 1990, California was home to at least 10,000 immigrants from each of 66 different countries. The largest single country of origin of immigrants to California is Mexico, with five times as many immigrants as the next leading country of origin: the Philippines. The Philippines, in turn, is the country of origin of twice as many immigrants as the next leading countries: El Salvador, and Vietnam.

Immigrants in California live throughout the state. While immigrants are concentrated in the state's largest urban areas, particularly Los Angeles, sizable populations of immigrants live in many of the state's counties. The presence of sizable numbers of immigrants in many regions of California is in direct contrast to geographic distributions in other states. For example, in New York state, immigrants are concentrated in the New York City metropolitan area with very small populations in the rest of the state; in Illinois, the vast majority of immigrants live in the Chicago area.

Most immigrants in California are not citizens of the United States. In 1990 in California, among immigrant adults in the United States at least five years only 43 percent had naturalized. Naturalization rates vary tremendously by country of origin, with immigrants from Italy, Ireland, Germany, Hong Kong, and the Philippines all having naturalization rates in excess of 70 percent (in 1990), and immigrants from Nicaragua, Mexico, Cambodia, Guatemala, Laos, and El Salvador all having naturalization rates of less than 30 percent. Since 1990, naturalization rates have risen substantially for Mexican immigrants in California. This increase can be attributed to the INS' efforts to encourage citizenship, amnesty which legalized the status of many formerly unauthorized immigrants, and a response to Proposition 187.

### **Socioeconomic Characteristics of California's Immigrants**

Immigrants in California tend to be less educated and tend to have lower incomes than other residents of the state. However, labor force participation rates tend to be quite high for immigrants, and a substantial proportion of immigrants are college graduates. Many of these socioeconomic measures vary tremendously by country of origin. Proficiency in English varies tremendously by immigrant generation, with first generation immigrants tending to have low rates of proficiency and second generation descendants of immigrants having very high levels of proficiency.

In general, immigrants from Asia, Canada, and Europe have relatively high levels of education and incomes. A notable exception are Southeast Asian immigrants. One of the fastest growing groups of immigrants in California in the 1980s, most Southeast Asian immigrants came to the United States as refugees of the Vietnam War. Southeast Asian immigrants in California have among the lowest levels of educational attainment and among the lowest incomes of any immigrant group. For example, only about 5 percent of immigrants from Laos and Cambodia had graduated from college in 1990, compared to over 60 percent of immigrants from Taiwan and India.

Immigrants from Latin America tend to be poorly educated and earn low incomes. Still, labor force participation rates are quite high for these immigrants. Indeed, the working poor in California are likely to be immigrants from Latin America. Among male

immigrants aged 25-54 from Latin America, about 90 percent are in the labor force. Despite their high levels of labor force participation and employment, over 25 percent of Mexican immigrants lived at or below the poverty level in 1990.

## **Conclusion**

To understand the opportunities and challenges facing immigrants in California, it is first necessary to understand that immigrants are not a monolithic group. Indeed, immigrants in California originate from a diverse set of countries, and come to the United States with a diverse set of skills. The geographic spread of immigrants to almost every part of California suggests that the successful integration of immigrants is not a localized issue, but is one of statewide concern. In this testimony, I have presented an array of statistics and measures that illustrate the diversity of immigrants in the state, and point out some of the challenges to their successful integration. The large population of immigrants in California means that the future of immigrants and their descendants will largely determine the future of California.